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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the question of faculty as "community." The study examined community-building efforts at one institution, which had been initiated in response to negative outside judgment about faculty effectiveness and that threatened the continued existence of the teacher preparation program. A "community committee" survey asked 32 faculty members in a large, urban university to define what they considered important elements of community, whether such conditions for community existed at the institution, and what could be done to bring about conditions supporting community. The study found that, overall, the education department resisted community-building efforts. Many of the faculty refused to submit written responses to the survey; some responded verbally and these responses were mostly negative, saying that establishing community was a futile endeavor. Written responses were more positive, offering suggestions for supporting scholarship and improving collegiality. However, when given coded anonymous responses, the committee paid no attention to the suggestions offered, finessed responses as a critique of the dean and his policies, and tried to uncover anonymity; when that failed, the issue was dropped. The study concludes that, in part, institutional factors such as tenure and promotion mitigate against community, but the lack of community mostly results from the absence of respect and trust within the professional community. (CH)

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ED 438 742

Patricia Calderwood
APA, August 21, 1999

Resisting Community: Challenges for Participatory Action

People believe in community. It is not only a cherished notion of close-knit humanity, but is a fundamental expression of the cooperative human social activity that insures our survival as a species. Connection, caring, interdependence, shared values, rituals and celebrations, the security of being known, of belonging to a group, of being significant.... these images, among many others, come to mind when one thinks about community. Within our complex society, the social relations of community mitigate against anonymity and humanize our institutions. The infusion of a sense of community, in fact, is often suggested as a remedy when our institutions cannot effectively function as we desire. Resilient community is celebrated not only because it enhances our humanity, but because many people believe that other worthy ends can be accomplished best in the presence of community.

Intro

I spent 3 semesters as a substitute assistant professor in a large urban university before moving to my current school. Much about that experience was satisfying and rewarding, but there also was much that frustrated or puzzled me. I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about one of those puzzles, the resistance of the faculty to cohering together in community. The call for community had been raised within the faculty as a necessary antidote to the perceived absence of collegial scholarship, and, on the part of the dean, as a defensive response to actual and anticipated negative outsider judgment about the effectiveness of the faculty's work. Numerous factors simultaneously supported and mitigated against the faculty's community-building efforts, including old history and current grudges, exhaustion from overwork, silence and voice born of frustration. Multiple attempts at building community and a sense of community were undermined overtly by the faculty members who resisted participating, and covertly by the faculty members who most enthusiastically participated in the ostensible community-building practices.

Background

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A series of moves toward cross-campus connections between the education division and the liberal arts and sciences shone a lens on the discord, discontent and disaffection among the education faculty. Although this discord was not news to insiders, it held newly serious implications for the future of the education division, which found itself in potential disgrace concerning the disputable success of its teacher preparation programs. High status certification from an organization such as NCATE (a prominent teacher education accreditation body) was seen as the path to salvation from a potential shutdown of some or all of the programs. Although not all of the twenty-odd education faculty took the doomsday scenario seriously, or even paid much attention to the threat, the dean of the division urged that proactive measures be undertaken. He, through the three department chairs, arranged a series of faculty retreats complete with invited expert consultants that were intended to blast the faculty into action. As a result of the retreats and expert advice, a list of work to be done was compiled and committees were formed to get the work done.

The work of the community committee

I signed up for "the community committee." Since there was no clear agenda set for the committee, the four of us decided to begin by surveying the faculty.

We asked them to respond in writing to the following questions:

- What are important elements of community?
- Do conditions for community exist in our division and/or in the college? Do other conditions you find to be important exist here?
- Why do you believe that these conditions for community exist or fail to exist here?
- What can we all do together to support or to bring about the conditions you find important?

I intended to distribute surveys to the entire education division, and met with the first overt indication that the committee would undermine any efforts to be inclusive. As at many institutions, there is a demarcation between tenure track faculty and non-tenure track staff, as well as clear distinctions between faculty, administrators, support staff and students. One of the committee members strongly objected to including two groups in any of our considerations,

despite the fact that they were officially part of the education division. They weren't real faculty, I was told, and had no place in any community we might build. I sent them surveys anyway. In all, I distributed 32 surveys, promising anonymity.

The way that the faculty responded to the survey was very interesting. Only half of the faculty returned the surveys, but many of the others responded to me in the halls, parking lot, etc. Most of the hallway conversations were with long-tenured faculty who had become disillusioned. These face to face responses held a few common threads: that establishing a sense of community was a futile endeavor, that there was too much "old history" in the way, and that they hoped that I wouldn't be disappointed when my work did not bear fruit.

The sixteen surveys that were returned also held common themes, but these were more hopeful. The respondents wrote of scholarship and collegiality as desirable, noted the absence of collegiality, and offered a number of possible ways to improve collegiality and support scholarship. They also laid out markers of community including trust and respect, sharing, feelings of connection, and trusted leadership.

I collected and aggregated the written responses and kept indications of responder identity as vague as possible. Only I saw the original responses. Committee response to the 16 coded, anonymous responses was alarming. Rather than use the responses as a blueprint for further action, committee members fine combed the responses in a quest to outmaneuver anonymity and to gossip about other faculty. In addition, every response was finessed as a critique of the dean and his policies. There was no attention paid to following any of the suggestions, nor of exploring the striking differences in the written and hallway responses. The surveys distributed to the faculty were ignored after attempts to use them retributively were thwarted, and no further work was done by the community committee. The committee evaporated.

Challenges to participatory action

The work of this committee raises some issues that plague participatory action for change in many groups. We need to pay attention to these questions:

1. We need to identify and understand the multiple and layered sets of assumptions about current/desired social relations held by the participants.

2. We need to understand, from multiple perspectives, current practices and their history before jumping in and insisting on changes. What purposes do the current practices and social relations serve for the whole group, powerful individuals and/or sub-groups, and the less powerful or marginalized within the group? What purposes do the practices of the group serve for the institutions in which they operate?

3. When we label practices as resistant, we need to consider just what counts as resistance- is it opposition to dominant practices or is it insistence on maintaining status quo/ Who is resisting what?

4. How important is it to overcome resistance - is force ever appropriate, how do we hold back from exerting such force, especially when we feel strongly that our agendas are good, right, helpful, etc.

5. Where are the concentrations of power in the group? Do agendas dovetail, compete or accommodate each other? How does the group know what changes are beneficial and which are detrimental for the group as a whole, and for individuals and subgroups within?

6. What internal differences such as desired trajectories, understandings of power, collegiality, etc. will persevere, unchanged or barely altered despite efforts to make changes?

7. With specific regard to community: are the practices of community always positively valenced (Blot, personal communication)? Setting up a uni-directional understanding of the structure and function of community may preclude sufficient recognition and understanding of actual practices of the group, which, although not so delightful, are indeed the practices of community for that group.

Marginalization, empoweredness, dominance, and resistance are all relative. University professors are quite powerful, especially when seen in counterpoint with groups who suffer real hardship from marginalization. With such an empowered population, one must ask why "community" hasn't taken hold, what purpose does the absence of the desired social relations

serve. Some of the answer lies in institutional factors such as the tenure and promotion process, some in the decades old patterns of mistrust and betrayal within the education division, but a more mundane explanation may be useful. The absence of some practices of professional community, such as respect and trust, was normal and ordinary, and served to maintain the group over time. Other practices, such as the rigorous normalization of new faculty into solitary scholarship and mistrust were pervasive and well developed. The questions I listed above produced complex answers that could have directed participatory action toward building a sense of community among the faculty, but did not. The questions and answers produced a necessary discomfort, but unfortunately a discomfort that proved too difficult to maintain in the service of moving toward community.

Nancy Sherper Hughes writes of her work with slum dwellers in Brazil to improve health and nutrition conditions for impoverished women & children. As a critical mass for changes struggled to emerge, their work was often undermined from within, and by a way of life that understood the widespread death of children as tragically normal and ordinary rather than as an outrage. The outcome of those efforts were literally life and death, indisputably urgent.

The problems this faculty experienced in moving toward community may seem trivial in comparison, but the way we interacted as a group profoundly affected the education we were able to facilitate for our students, most of whom were poor, poorly educated, and struggling to change their lives through education. Far too much energy was diverted away from what ought to have been a central practice of community: participating effectively in the transformative potential of education with our students.